

3/28/22 Monday

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Disney Pledges to Help Repeal 'Don't Say Gay' Law After Florida's DeSantis Signs Measure

Despite widespread outrage, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis on Monday signed into law a bill that bans classroom instruction about the diversity of sexualities and genders that he says will protect children from "sexual instruction."

On Monday, DeSantis signed into law the "Parental Rights in Education" bill, better known as House Bill 1557 or simply the "Don't Say Gay" bill.

When the law takes effect in July, it will ban education about LGBTQ identities for children between kindergarten and third grade, and advise "age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate" lessons for older children that conform to state academic standards. The law will allow parents to sue schools or teachers who engage with those topics.

"We will continue to recognize that in the state of Florida, parents have a fundamental role in the education, health care and well-being of their children. We will not move from that," [DeSantis said](#) at the bill's signing.

The bill has been [furiously protested](#) since it was introduced in January, with US President Joe [Biden speaking out](#) about it as well as LGBTQ advocacy groups and [corporate media giant Disney](#), which operates the huge EPCOT Center theme park in Florida and is a major donor to local politicians.

After DeSantis signed the bill on Monday, [Disney issued a statement](#) saying it "should never have been signed into law" and promising to support its repeal.

"Our goal as a company is for this law to be repealed by the legislature or struck down in the courts, and we remain committed to supporting the national and state organizations working to achieve that. We are dedicated to standing up for the rights and safety of LGBTQ+ members of the Disney family, as well as the LGBTQ+ community in Florida and across the country," the statement added.

Equality Florida, the state's leading LGBTQ advocacy group, also [said earlier this month](#) that it intends to challenge the law in court.

Opponents of the bill have called attention to the [detrimental mental health effects](#) on LGBTQ youth who feel unsupported, including a vastly higher rate of attempted suicide as compared to non-LGBTQ youth.

"One way schools can support LGBTQ youth is by including positive content about LGBTQ people and issues in classroom curriculums," said the Trevor Project, the world's largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for LGBTQ youth, in a [study summary published](#) in August 2021.

"Representation in school curriculums can affirm LGBTQ youth's sexual and gender identities. In addition to creating affirming environments, schools can also prevent suicide by providing all staff and students with comprehensive suicide prevention training," the group added.

However, for DeSantis and his supporters, the concern seems to be that children will learn to be more accepting of transgender peers - or come out as trans themselves after learning about them in school.

"[H]ow many parents want their kids to have transgenderism or something injected into classroom instruction?" [DeSantis said at a March 4](#) press conference. "It's basically saying for our younger students, do you really want them being taught about sex? And this is any sexual stuff. But I think clearly right now, we see a focus on transgenderism, telling kids they may be able to pick genders and all of that."

His spokesperson, Christina Pushaw, went even further, calling it [an "anti-grooming bill"](#) and claiming that anyone who opposed the bill was "probably a groomer," a term that refers to how pedophiles lure children into trusting them so they can exploit them sexually.

That posturing evokes the 1970s ["Save Our Children" campaign](#) spearheaded by pop singer Anita Bryant. The movement, which started in Florida's Dade County before spreading to several other states, aimed to revoke laws protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination. The movement's momentum was finally blunted after gay San Francisco City Councilor Harvey Milk [organized an effective effort](#) to convince Californians to vote down a referendum banning LGBTQ teachers from California schools.

The Florida bill is [one of more than 160](#) that potentially infringe on LGBTQ rights in US state legislatures this year, according to the LGBTQ rights group [Human Rights Campaign](#). These bills span a wide variety of topics, from banning trans girls from competing on girls' sports teams to banning trans women from using women's restrooms.

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Blinken Meets 'Abraham Accords' Partners in Negev as Israel Authorizes Five New Settlements There

In the June 2021 deal that forged Israel's ruling coalition government, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid agreed to a nine-month freeze on settlement construction in the Negev Desert to win the support of the Joint Arab List.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met on Monday with foreign ministers from four Arab states that have normalized relations with Israel - Morocco, Egypt, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates - in Israel's southern Negev desert.

"Just a few years ago this gathering would have been impossible to imagine. The United States has and will continue to strongly support a process that is transforming the region and beyond," Blinken said at the Negev summit.

An Israeli diplomatic [official told journalists](#) that Israel had discussed with its Arab partners "advancing a regional security architecture," focusing on threats by "air, sea, and piracy."

In the wake of Israel's lightning victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, when it seized the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula, the Arab League members met in Khartoum to forswear the ["Three Nos" regarding Israel](#): no recognition, no peace, no

negotiation. Aside from the above-mentioned states, plus Sudan and Jordan, no Arab power has diplomatic relations with Israel.

While Egypt negotiated a peace deal with Israel in the 1970s that culminated in the 1978 Camp David Accords, the other three states did so in 2020 as part of what then-US President Donald Trump called the Abraham Accords. Sudan also normalized relations in 2020, although with a [military junta in power](#) since October, Sudan has seen Jerusalem distance itself from Khartoum on the public stage.

The Abraham Accords were also supposed to forestall Israel's planned annexation of part of the Jordan River Valley in the West Bank, which is desired by many Zionist leaders but opposed by Palestinians, and which would violate United Nations [Security Council resolutions](#) deeming the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and its annexations of East Jerusalem and the Golan to be illegal.

A day prior, Blinken [met with senior Israeli leaders](#) before going to Ramallah to meet with Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian National Authority, a government that exercises authority over parts of the West Bank as a consequence of the 1994-5 Oslo Accords. It was envisaged that this government would become the nucleus of a future Palestinian state, but negotiations with Israel stalled long ago, and the perpetual march of Jewish settlers into the West Bank has only further complicated the situation.

"The current events in Europe have shown blatant double standards," Abbas told Blinken on Sunday. "Despite the crimes of the Israeli occupation that amounted to ethnic cleansing and racial discrimination... we find no one who is holding Israel responsible for behaving as a state above the law."

Jordan's King Abdullah II also visited Abbas in the West Bank but declined to go to the Negev summit. However, he did [meet with Lapid earlier](#) this month in an attempt to ensure there would be no provocations at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque by Jewish settlers during Ramadan, which begins on Friday. Last year, violence in East Jerusalem, including the storming of Al-Aqsa by Israeli settlers and police, helped [set off an 11-day war](#) between Israel and Gaza that killed 254 Palestinians and 13 Israelis.

Also on Sunday, the Israeli cabinet [approved the construction](#) of four new Jewish settlements in the eastern Negev near the Dead Sea: one kibbutz and three villages. A fifth settlement was also approved for Bedouin Arabs who live in the region. As part of the [deal to form a coalition government](#) last June, Lapid agreed to a nine-month settlement freeze in the Negev to win the support of the Joint Arab List, or Ra'am - the only Arab party in the Knesset to ever join an Israeli government. That moratorium expired earlier this month.

However, the expansion of Israeli settlements in the Negev is strongly opposed by the roughly 300,000 Bedouins, [who are often evicted](#) from their towns and farms. [Protests swept the region](#) in January after the Jewish National Fund proposed forestry expansion onto Bedouin farms near the village of Sawa on Tu BiShevat, which functions as Israel's Arbor Day.

"Our goal is to return the state to the Negev – Zionism 2022," Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, a right-wing figure who supports annexation of the West Bank, [said on Sunday](#). "This is neither ex territoria, nor is it the Wild West but a place in which the State of Israel is present – in both governance and resources."

Blinken is set to travel to North Africa, including Algeria and Morocco, later this week.

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IRGC Chief Says 'Eternal Fear' Keeps Iran's Enemies From Attacking Islamic Republic

Earlier this month, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) launched a missile attack against what they called "Israeli strategic centers" in the Iraqi city of Erbil, reportedly in revenge for an attack on a drone facility in the Iranian city of Kermanshah by the Israeli Mossad weeks prior.

Speaking to reporters in the southwestern city of Khorramshahr on Monday, Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, commander of the IRGC, said Iran had not been attacked by its enemies owing to their "eternal fear" of an Iranian response.

"Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran's pillar of power is firm and strong, and Iran is shining in the world," he said, according to [Tasnim News Agency](#).

His words came amid a [visit to the region](#) by the Rahian-e Noor ("passengers of light"), who make a pilgrimage to historic battlefields around the time of Nowruz, or the Iranian new year. Much of the Iran-Iraq War was fought in the [surrounding Khuzestan province](#), which Iraq invaded in 1980 in an attempt to seize the oil-rich region with a large ethnic Arab population. However, the invasion didn't go as planned and more than 1 million people were killed on both sides by the time the United Nations brokered a ceasefire eight years later.

Earlier this month, the IRGC [launched a dozen missiles](#) at the Iraqi city of Erbil, capital of the northern Kurdistan region, claiming to be targeting a Mossad facility there, [reportedly in retaliation](#) for a suicide drone strike against an Iranian drone facility in Kermanshah in February. Israel has denied having a facility there and Kurdistan government officials said the missiles fell in residential areas.

Afterward, Salami said that any future attacks against Iran would be met with an immediate response.

"Be aware that we will not only take part in the funeral of our martyrs, but also immediately take their revenge. This is a real and serious message. If your mischief is repeated, you will once again experience our attacks and suffer the bitter taste of our missile blows," [Salami said at the time](#).

"In recent weeks you have seen how Zionists are always wrong in their calculations and have been targeted by Revolutionary Guard missiles. We are warning them that they should cease their mischief or we will bury them alive," Salami added.

While negotiations to restart the 2015 nuclear deal are [within a hair's breadth](#) of completion in Vienna, the Israeli government has never supported the deal and has carried out its own [espionage campaign](#) in Iran against the country's nuclear program. That has included sabotage operations and political assassinations like the broad-daylight killing of [Mohsen Fakhrizadeh](#), a top Iranian nuclear scientist, in November 2020.

The deal would see US sanctions against Iran dropped in exchange for Iran accepting strict limitations on the quality and quantity of uranium it can refine, sufficient to limit them to operating a handful of low-enrichment uranium-fueled nuclear power plants. The deal is supposed to curtail Iran's ability to develop a nuclear weapon, but Tehran says its nuclear program is

peaceful and that the country has forsworn all weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons.

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Gunfire Reported at Cancun International Airport

Gunfire was reported at Cancun International Airport in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula on Monday. A video posted on social media showed travelers scrambling out of Airport Terminal 3 on Monday, where gunfire and explosions were reported. Authorities declared a Code Red and summoned law enforcement and medical officials, [according to Mexican news](#) reports. According to the Quintana Roo secretary of public security, [Lucio Hernandez Guiterrez](#), there have been no reports of injuries or of cartridges or explosion damage to support the claims of gunfire.

The shooting has come during one of the airport's busiest seasons, as travelers flock to the resort area for Spring Break vacations. However, [according to local officials](#), the level of traffic is still far below what was typical before the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020.

The incident also comes months after [two people were killed](#) in a firefight at Cancun's Hyatt Ziva Riviera resort. The people killed were suspected to have ties to drug trafficking gangs. In June 2021, two were also [killed on Playa Tortugas](#) by gunmen who fled the scene on jet skis.

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Google CEO's Foundation Paid WH Staffers in What Legal Team Called 'Conflict of Interest' By - Wyatt Reed

Google CEO Eric Schmidt's foundation paid the salaries of multiple employees of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, according to a shocking new report which appears to expose corruption at the highest levels of US government.

Per [Politico](#), Schmidt's charitable organization, Schmidt Futures, "indirectly paid the salaries of two science-office employees, including, for six weeks, that of the current chief of staff, Marc Aidinoff, who is now one of the most senior officials in the office."

"[Schmidt Futures] involvement in funding positions for specific figures raised repeated red flags from internal White House watchdogs," according to Politico.

White House staffers reportedly described Schmidt's "unusual level of influence" over the office—including at least a dozen of the office's 140-some employees allegedly having direct connections to the former Google CEO—led to a situation where its legal team "regularly flagged possible conflicts of interest involving Schmidt and Schmidt Futures," the article notes.

The office's general counsel at the time, Rachel Wallace, told Politico that she "and others on the legal team had been noticing a large number of staff with financial connections to Schmidt Futures and were increasingly concerned about the influence this organization was able to have through these individuals."

Wallace went public as a whistleblower with the Government Accountability Project in March after Biden's former science advisor Eric Lander stepped down after a White House investigation found "credible evidence" that he bullied Wallace and violated other workplace standards with multiple employees.

Lander is also reportedly another close associate of the Google CEO.

Although the White House reportedly said there was "nothing unusual about its ties to Schmidt," Politico reports that one legal analyst with the OSTP directly requested a colleague withdraw from the Schmidt fellowship because their work for the foundation and the White House, "poses a very significant conflict of interest" and that two employees subsequently exited their positions. Eric Schmidt's proximity to the US national security state (and the Democratic Party establishment in particular) is no secret. In 2016, the Tech Transparency Project described Schmidt as "[Obama's Chief Corporate Ally](#)."

He chaired the U.S. National Commission on Artificial Intelligence from 2018 to 2021 and co-authored a 2021 book with former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, "The Age of AI: And Our Human Future," calling for greater investment in Artificial Intelligence as a means of confronting China.

In the keynote address given to the Air Force Association Warfare Symposium on March 4, Schmidt urged more Google-DoD AI initiatives like the controversial Project Maven, which ultimately led around a dozen conscientious Google employees to resign in protest: "We need 20, 30, 40 such groups. More, more, more."

Described by Wikileaks founder and whistleblower Julian Assange in a [2014 article](#) recalling their meeting, "Schmidt's tenure as CEO saw Google integrate with the shadiest of US power structures as it expanded into a geographically invasive megacorporation."

As Assange tells it: "Schmidt fits exactly where he is: the point where the centrist, liberal, and imperialist tendencies meet in American political life. By all appearances, Google's bosses genuinely believe in the civilizing power of enlightened multinational corporations, and they see this mission as continuous with the shaping of the world according to the better judgment of the 'benevolent superpower.' They will tell you that open-mindedness is a virtue, but all perspectives that challenge the exceptionalist drive at the heart of American foreign policy will remain invisible to them."

What Lockheed Martin was for the twentieth century, technology and cyber-security companies appear poised to become in the twenty-first.

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US May Need to Deploy More Troops in Europe Amid Changing Security Environment - General WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The number of US troops in Europe will likely be increased in light of the changing security environment in the region after the conflict in Ukraine

comes to an end, European Command (EUCOM) head Gen. Tod Wolters said during a congressional hearing on Tuesday.

"I would just tell you that based off of the dynamic environment that exists today, that number [of US troops in Europe] could change. I suspect that it probably will, and in which direction will be determined based off conditions in the environment," Wolters told the US Senate Armed Services Committee. "My suspicion is we're going to still need more."

Wolters underscored that the United States must to be ready to adjust to the new security conditions in Europe following the completion of Russia's special operation in Ukraine by altering the size of US contributions to the region.

The EUCOM commander added that the United States' presence in Europe has gone up from 60,000 to 100,000 troops as a result of the Russian special operation.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger.

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White House Phone Logs Sent to US House January 6 Committee Have 7-Hour Gap - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Eleven pages of White House telephone logs that the National Archives turned over to the US House Select Committee investigating the January 6 riot at the US Capitol have a seven-hour gap with no record of the calls former President Donald Trump made and who received them, the Washington Post reported on Tuesday.

Internal White House records from January 6, 2021 that were turned over to the US House Select Committee show a gap in President Donald Trump's phone logs of seven hours and 37 minutes, the report said.

The Select Committee is now probing whether Trump used "burner" phones, communicated through back-channels or used aides' telephones, said two people with knowledge of the probe who spoke on the condition of anonymity. The panel is also trying to determine if it received the full logs reflecting all the calls placed and received on Jan 6.

Earlier this month, the Select Committee filed court papers presenting what they believe is evidence that Trump, attorney John Eastman and others could potentially be charged with criminal offenses, including obstructing an official proceeding of Congress and conspiracy to defraud the American people.

The Select Committee members have alleged there is enough evidence to conclude that Trump and his associates may have conspired to commit fraud and obstruction by misleading Americans about the outcome of the 2020 election and attempting to overturn the result. Trump - and numerous Republicans - have said the work of the Select Committee is a political theater and a witch hunt conducted primarily by Democrats to prevent the former president and his allies to run for office. Conservatives have pointed out that the FBI's investigation into the January 6 events found no evidence of a conspiracy and also the Select Committee had refused

to include lawmakers such as Congressman Jim Jordan that would be critical of its activities and narrative.

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Canada to Make 'Significant Contribution' to ICC Probes, Including in Ukraine - Minister

TORONTO, March 28 (Sputnik) -- Canada plans to play an important role in the International Criminal Court's (ICC) ongoing investigations, including a probe into the conflict in Ukraine, Minister of Public Safety Marco Mendicino said on Tuesday.

"Today, I am announcing that Canada will be making a significant contribution to the International Criminal Court's (ICC) ongoing investigations, including the ongoing investigation into the situation in Ukraine, further to a request from the ICC's Office of the Prosecutor," Mendicino said in a statement.

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Biden Concludes Call on Ukraine With European Counterparts - White House

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden at 10:12 a.m. EDT (14:12 GMT) concluded his call with four European counterparts to discuss the ongoing Russian special operation in Ukraine, the White House said on Tuesday.

"President Biden's call with French President Macron, German Chancellor Scholz, Italian Prime Minister Draghi, and UK Prime Minister Johnson concluded at 10:12 EDT," the White House said in a pool report.

The leaders began their call almost an hour earlier at 9:19 a.m. EDT, according to a previous White House pool report.

Leaders from the US, NATO, EU and others have stepped up collaboration on sanctions and collective defense in recent weeks in response to the Russian special operation in Ukraine.

The operation, which began in late February, is intended to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine in defense of the Donbas republics, the Kremlin said. Negotiations between Russian and Ukrainian delegations are ongoing, with lead Russian negotiator Vladimir Medinsky calling Tuesday's talks in Istanbul "constructive."

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Deputy US Treasury Secretary Says Will Find, Hold Accountable Russia Sanctions Evaders

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The United States will find and hold accountable individuals or entities that attempt to evade sanctions imposed on Russia for its special operation in Ukraine, Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said on Tuesday.

"We're paying a lot of attention to sanctions evasion... What we want to make very clear to crypto exchanges, to financial institutions, to individuals, to anyone who may be in a position to help Russia take advantage and evade our sanctions: We will hold you accountable. We will come and we will find you," Adeyemo said during an interview with CNBC.

Cryptocurrencies and shell companies are possible means by which actors could attempt to bypass the sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and its allies in response to Russia's special operation in Ukraine, Adeyemo said.

The United States has not yet seen Russia evade sanctions in a meaningful way, but they are attempting to do so, Adeyemo added.

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Google Announces \$35Mln in Ukraine Refugee Aid, \$10Mln to Fight Disinformation - CEO

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Google is donating \$35 million for aid to Ukrainian refugees and spending another \$10 million to set up a "Jigsaw initiative" to counter what it call "disinformation" about the conflict, company CEO Sundar Pichai announced on Tuesday.

"Today, we announced several additional initiatives to help with these efforts, and to support the post-war recovery of Central and Eastern Europe," Pichai said in a statement. "To help the humanitarian aid efforts on the ground in Central and Eastern Europe, Google.org and Googlers have committed over \$35 million in funding and in-kind support."

Pichai said the measure includes support for organizations focused on people in Ukraine, like Nova Ukraine and Fight for Right, as well as nonprofits supporting refugees in bordering countries, such as the Polish Center for International Aid, Hungarian Interchurch Aid and People in Need in Slovakia.

"A big part of the challenge is addressing the misinformation that is spreading about the realities and facts of the war in Ukraine. Today we're investing an additional \$10 million for this effort, including new partnerships with think tanks and civil society organizations to conduct region-specific research into misinformation and disinformation, as well as cash grants to support fact-checking networks and nonprofits," Pichai said.

The new organization will be called Jigsaw and will function as a unit within Google that builds technology to counter threats to open societies, will partner with local experts and academics to develop approaches to both directly counter disinformation and help people more easily identify disinformation, Pichai added.

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Blinken Says US Focused on Russia's Deeds Rather Than Words

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday there is what Russia says and there is what Russia does, with the United States focusing on the latter. "There is what Russia says and there is what Russia does, we are focused on the latter," Blinken said at a press conference with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita in Rabat.

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Trump Calls on Putin to Release Info on Hunter Biden's Ties to Ex-Moscow Mayor's Wife

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump on Tuesday called on Russian President Vladimir Putin to release information related dealings between current US President Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, and the wife of the former mayor of Moscow. In 2020, a group of US Senate Republicans revealed that an investment firm co-founded by Hunter Biden received \$3.5 million from the wife of former Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov, billionaire Elena Baturina, as part of a "consultancy agreement."

"Why did the Moscow Mayor's wife give [Joe and Hunter Biden] \$3.5 million... I would think Putin would know the answer to that, I think he should release it. I think we should know that answer," Trump said.

When previously asked about the issue, Putin refused to comment and denied any knowledge of ties between Baturina and the Biden family.

The White House has downplayed the allegations made by Senators and the report that digs into the Biden family's business endeavors in Ukraine and are now part of several investigations in the US.

White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said last week that she is unfamiliar with the report and questioned the evidence behind it. Biden, meanwhile, has repeatedly brushed off the accusations, claiming them to be a "Russian disinformation."

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Blinken Declines to Comment on Results of Russia-Ukraine Talks

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday declined to comment on the results of Russia-Ukraine peace talks and left it to Kiev to assess any progress.

"First on the talks. I would leave it to Ukrainian partners to characterize whether there is any genuine progress and whether Russia is engaging meaningfully," Blinken said while speaking at a press conference with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita in Rabat.

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Johnson & Johnson Suspends Supply of Personal Care Products in Russia

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – US health care company Johnson & Johnson said on Tuesday it is suspending the supply of personal care products in Russia.

"We have decided to suspend supply of our personal care products in Russia," the company said.

It also announced plans to double its donations to humanitarian assistance efforts in Ukraine from \$5 million to \$10 million.

In early March, Johnson & Johnson suspended all advertising, enrollment in clinical trials, and any additional investment in Russia in response to the situation in Ukraine.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian provocations. In response to Russia's operation, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow, which includes airspace closures and restrictive measures targeting numerous Russian officials and entities, media, and financial institutions. Some foreign companies have suspended their Russian operations altogether.

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US Envoy Visiting Gulf States for Talks on Yemen – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking is visiting Gulf states to discuss diplomatic efforts toward a durable and inclusive resolution of the Yemen conflict, the State Department said on Tuesday.

"Special Envoy Lenderking will prioritize his engagements in the region on mobilizing additional life-saving humanitarian assistance for Yemen," the statement read.

Although the US has provided an additional \$585 million to Yemen, the country's humanitarian response remains just 30% funded, it added.

In addition, the Middle Eastern nation is facing a lack of wheat supplies caused by the crisis in Ukraine. The latter has accounted for over 30% of Yemen's wheat imports, the statement noted. While in Saudi Arabia, Lenderking will participate in intra-Yemeni dialogue facilitated by the Gulf Cooperation Council.

"The United States welcomes opportunities for Yemenis to come together, to represent their diverse experiences and perspectives, and to identify solutions and reforms that can improve the lives of citizens," the statement said.

Yemen has been gripped by an internal conflict between the government forces and the Houthi movement. Since 2015, the Saudi-led coalition fighting on the Yemeni government's side has

been conducting air, land and sea operations against the rebels. The Houthis often retaliate by firing projectiles and drones toward Saudi territory.

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US to Boost Stinger, Javelin Production to Refill Stock During Ukraine Supply - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon plans to accelerate production of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles and Javelin anti-tank missiles to replenish US stocks as the country continues to send the weapons systems to Ukraine, CNN reported on Tuesday, citing defense officials.

Last week, the channel reported that Ukraine was asking the US to provide it with 500 Stinger and 500 Javelin missiles daily.

The US Stinger missile production line was shut down, but has been restarted to fulfill overseas sales orders, according to the report. Several options for production capacity are now being considered to maintain efficient operation, Pentagon spokeswoman Jessica Maxwell said. The US Department of Defense also hopes to increase production of Javelin missiles. In 2022, it expects to produce more than 6,000 Javelin missiles, according to documents seen by the channel.

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Biden to Discuss Ukraine With Macron, Scholz, Draghi, Johnson on Tuesday - White House

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will hold a phone call on Ukraine with the leaders of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom at 9:15 EST (13:15 GMT), White House pool reporters said on Tuesday.

"President Biden will convene a call this morning w/ [Emmanuel] Macron of France, [Olaf] Scholz of Germany, [Mario] Draghi of Italy + [Boris] Johnson of the United Kingdom to discuss the latest developments regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine," the statement said.

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Biden, Singapore's Lee to Discuss How Ukraine Crisis Impacts Indo-Pacific - Official

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during a meeting at the White House later on Tuesday will discuss how the conflict

in Ukraine affects the international community, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, a senior US administration official said.

Biden is scheduled to welcome the Singaporean prime minister to the White House at 10:45 a.m. EST (2:45 p.m. GMT) on Tuesday before they hold their meeting in the Oval Office.

Following the meeting the two leaders will make a joint press statement, according to the White House.

"I think that we also expect that the leaders will discuss how what is happening in Ukraine also has implications for the rest of the world, including the Indo-Pacific," the US official said during a conference call.

Both leaders will discuss the roles the United States and China play in the Indo-Pacific, the US official added.

The two leaders will also talk about promoting democracy in Myanmar and the Indo-Pacific economic framework, the official said.

There will also be discussions between Biden and Lee about US investments in Singapore and Southeast Asia, including the need for an affirmative economic agenda in the region and that the region looks to the United States to play a significant role, according to the official.

US Vice President Kamala Harris is also expected to host a bilateral meeting with Lee later on Tuesday at the White House.

The US official mentioned that there will be some announcements expected, but no details were given.

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RPT - UN Says Treatment of Detained Military Personnel in Ukraine Must Follow Geneva Conventions

UNITED NATIONS, March 28 (Sputnik) - All detained military personnel in Ukraine or elsewhere must be treated in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, United Nations spokesperson Stephan Dujarric told Sputnik.

"We have not seen that video but, as a matter of principle, it is important that all detained military personnel be treated according to the Geneva Conventions," Dujarric said on Monday in response to a question about videos showing Ukrainian troops torturing detained Russian soldiers.

Chairman of the Russia's Investigative Committee Alexander Bastrykin ordered an investigation into the circumstances surrounding ill-treatment of the captured Russian servicemen by Ukrainian troops after the footage of torture appeared online.

The video shows Ukrainian troops shooting captured Russian soldiers in their legs and then withholding medical assistance while they bleed. According to the Investigative Committee, the footage was made at a military base of Ukrainian extreme nationalists located in the Kharkiv region.

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US Capitol Riot Committee Advances Measure to Cite Ex-Trump Advisers for Criminal Contempt

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US House committee investigating the January 6 Capitol riot by a 9-0 vote advanced a measure recommending the House of Representatives cite former Trump administration advisers Peter Navarro and Daniel Scavino for criminal contempt for refusing to cooperate with the panel's probe.

The meeting on Monday is the third time the committee has convened to consider criminal contempt charges against those associated with former President Donald Trump. The panel has so far approved contempt referrals for former Justice Department official Jeffrey Clarke, former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows and former Trump strategist Steve Bannon. Navarro served as former President Donald Trump's director of trade and manufacturing policy, and the policy coordinator for the National Defense Production Act. Scavino was Trump's deputy chief of staff.

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REVIEW: Biden Unveils \$5.8 Trillion Budget Request for 2023 - White House

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The White House on Monday rolled out US President Joe Biden's \$5.8 trillion budget proposal for fiscal year 2023 that requests increases in funding for Ukraine, global health security and activities to counter China and Russia.

The budget proposal seeks to provide Ukraine with \$682 million in assistance, an increase of \$219 million above the 2021 enacted level, to counter Russia's influence and to meet emerging needs related to security, energy, cybersecurity issues, disinformation, macroeconomic stabilization and civil society resilience.

The budget proposal requests \$6.9 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative, NATO and for efforts to counter Russian influence in the region.

In addition, Biden seeks in the proposal nearly \$1.8 billion to support a free and open Indo-Pacific region, and \$400 million to counter China's influence.

The budget proposal also requests \$10.6 billion to bolster the United States' role in addressing global health security challenges and \$11 billion for international climate finance.

Moreover, Biden has increased NASA's budget for space exploration by more than \$1 billion to \$7.5 billion in his fiscal year 2023 budget proposal.

"The budget provides \$7.5 billion, \$1.1 billion above the 2021 enacted level, for Artemis lunar exploration," the proposal said.

Artemis would return US astronauts to the Moon as early as 2025 for the first time since 1972, land the first woman and person of color on the Moon and deepen scientific understanding of

the Moon, the budget proposal said. The program would also test technologies that would allow humans to safely and sustainably explore Mars. Later lunar landing missions would also include astronauts from international partners, the president's proposal said.

Overall, Biden requested \$26 billion in discretionary funding for NASA.

The proposal includes a request for an additional \$6.5 billion for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), potentially lifting the agency's budget to \$97.3 billion.

According to the proposal, the DHS budget would include \$1 billion for cybersecurity, \$11.5 billion for the Coast Guard, \$15.3 billion for US Customs and Border Protection, and \$8.1 billion for Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

ELECTION SECURITY

Biden is proposing a total of \$15 billion in election assistance funding, to be spread out over ten years, to boost polling infrastructure and vote-by-mail, the White House said.

Similarly, the proposal seeks \$5 billion for the US Postal Service to expand its delivery capacity in "underserved areas and support for vote-by-mail, including making ballots postage free and reducing the cost of other election-related mail."

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

Biden's defense budget labels China as the United States' top national security threat and views Russia as an acute threat.

"The FY23 President's budget allows DoD to develop, procure, and modernize capabilities to ensure combat-credible forces across all domains to address the pacing challenge from the People's Republic of China and to address acute threats from Russia," the Defense Department said in its budget rollout on Monday.

Earlier in the day, US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks confirmed during a press briefing with other Defense Department officials that China is the most consequential US strategic competitor.

The officials accused Russia during the briefing that it pursues a political, economic and military strategy that seeks to fracture NATO.

The Biden administration said the proposed budget seeks to counter Russia, optimize Joint Force responsiveness to deter challenges in the European Command area of responsibility through investments that enhance US partners' readiness and capabilities in the region.

The budget specifically requests about \$5.1 billion to address security and strategic challenges posed by Russia in Europe.

The Defense Department seeks a greater sum - \$6.1 billion - for deterrence initiatives in the Pacific that includes integrated weapons, new missile warning and tracking architecture, construction to enable enhanced posture, funding for the defense of Guam as well as multinational information sharing, training and experimentation.

Moreover, the Defense Department said it is requesting \$34.4 billion to modernize the United States' nuclear triad - a sum that would fully fund the development of the new Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine, ramp up production funding for the new US B-21 bomber and fully fund the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent and Long Range Standoff programs to maintain initial fielding dates.

The Defense Department noted that the Army aims to field a hypersonic missile battery by 2023, the Navy by 2025 and the Air Force by 2027.

The budget proposal would also allocate \$24.7 billion for missile defense.

Finally, the proposal seeks to procure 61 F-35 fighter jets, 24 F-15EX jets, 15 KC-46 Pegasus as well as two Arleigh Burke class destroyers and two Virginia-class submarines.

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Trump Son-in-Law Kushner Expected to Appear Before January 6 Committee This Week - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, who served as a White House aide, is expected to appear voluntarily before the House Select Committee investigating the January 6 riot this week, ABC News reported.

Kushner could testify before the panel virtually as early as Thursday, the report said on Monday, citing multiple sources familiar with the plans.

Kushner oversaw a substantial portfolio while in the White House, including trying to secure a Middle East peace, managing the nation's medical stockpile, responsibility for construction of the wall at the US-Mexico border, and solving the opioid crisis.

Although Kushner distanced himself from the January 6 riot, members of the committee regard him as a key figure in the West Wing.

In text messages secured by the committee, Ginni Thomas, wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas – and a conservative activist who supported Trump's effort to overturn the 2020 presidential election – told former Trump Chief of Staff Mark Meadows that she had been communicating with Kushner about Sydney Powell, a Trump attorney who engaged in propagating and disseminating unfounded conspiracy theories about pervasive voter fraud. The panel may ask Thomas to cooperate voluntarily in the coming days, the report added.

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UPDATE - Academy Says Condemns Actor Will Smith's Attack During Oscars Ceremony, Launches Probe

(Adds statement from Will Smith in paras 6,7, fixes names in paras 2,3)

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences condemns actor Will Smith's attack on comedian Chris Rock during the 94th "Oscars" Academy Awards ceremony, the organization said on Monday in a statement quoted by US media.

"The Academy condemns the actions of Mr. Smith at last night's show. We have officially started a formal review around the incident and will explore further action and consequences in accordance with our Bylaws, Standards of Conduct and California law," the statement said.

Smith walked on stage and struck Rock's face after the comedian made a joke about his wife, Jada Pinkett Smith's, shaved head. Jada has alopecia, an autoimmune disorder that can cause baldness.

"Jada I love you, 'G.I. Jane 2,' can't wait to see it," Rock said moments before the incident. Smith shortly afterwards won the Best Actor Oscar for his role in the movie "King Richard," upon receiving of which he delivered a short speech addressing the incident and arguing he was standing up for his family.

In a statement on Instagram on Monday, Smith said his behavior at last night's Academy Awards was "unacceptable," and "inexcusable," then addressed Rock with an apology.

"I would like to publicly apologize to you, Chris. I was out of line and I was wrong. I am embarrassed and my actions were not indicative of the man I want to be. There is no place for violence in a world of love and kindness," Smith said.

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Lithuanian Man Extradited to US in \$3.5Mln Vehicles Sale Scam - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Stanislav Tunkevic of Lithuania has been extradited to the United States for engaging in bank fraud and money laundering - crimes that defrauded customers of at least \$3.5 million - and appeared in a Manhattan court today, the Justice Department said in a press release.

A second man, Vladislav Neceaeve, of Brooklyn, New York, recently pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bank fraud in connection with the same fraud scheme.

"As alleged, Tunkevic and Neceaeve laundered money for a group of fraudsters that preyed on innocent victims who were simply looking to buy a used car online, an act so common that it allowed the group of crooks to pocket millions off this elaborate scheme from unsuspecting customers," the release said on Monday.

Acting Special Agent-in-Charge Ricky Patel explained that Tunkevic and Neceaeve laundered money via partners who had fictitious websites to lure victims to fraudulent dealerships and profit off the backs of hard-working people looking to make a legitimate purchase.

From March 2019 to March 2021, Tunkevic and Neceaeve were a part of a Brooklyn money laundering crew coordinated by Neceaeve's mother and co-defendant, Natalia Korzha. The crew opened several bank accounts under the names of shell companies so they could launder money stolen from consumers seeking to purchase vehicles online, the release said.

The crew defrauded dozens of people for a total amount of \$3.5 million, the release added.

Tunkevic and Neceve face a maximum sentence of 30 years in prison and a maximum fine of \$1 million for bank fraud, and 20 years in prison and a maximum fine of \$500,000 for conspiring to launder money, according to the release.

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Biden Budget Proposal Seeks \$56.5Bln to Boost Air Combat Systems - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is seeking \$56.5 billion in its fiscal year 2023 budget proposal to boost the effectiveness and life cycles of existing US Air Force combat aircraft, including unmanned aerial systems (UASs), the Department of Defense announced.

The funding, if approved by Congress will go primarily towards purchasing more F-15X Eagle and F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, as well B-21 bombers, mobility aircraft for heavy airlifts, KC46A long-range refueling aircraft, specialized support aircraft and Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS), the budget proposal said.

The US Navy has requested \$16.8 billion in the budget proposal, made public on Monday, to buy an additional 13 F-35Cs - nine for the Navy and four for the Marine Corps as well as 15 F-35B short take-off and vertical landing aircraft, the proposal said.

The request for F-35Cs or Joint Strike Fighters (JSF) is a cut of seven aircraft from the Navy's earlier proposal of seeking 20 more of the aircraft in the 2023 budget, Navy Deputy Assistant Secretary for Budget Rear Admiral John Gumbleton acknowledged to reporters at a Pentagon press conference.

"The fact that we did come down in our JSF request was more about balance than anything else... I think we would have liked to have had more JSF, but that's the balance that we can yield," he said.

The budget review focused on general readiness issues as a priority over the number of new F-35s being requested, Gumbleton said.

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Biden Administration Scrapping 24 Ships, Paying \$40.8Bln for 9 New Ones - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has approved scrapping 24 US Navy ships in the coming fiscal year budget including nine of the controversial Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) to save \$3.6 billion while ordering the construction of nine new vessels for a total cost of \$40.8 billion, Pentagon officials said.

"As part of its Fiscal Year 2023 budget request, the Navy plans to decommission 9 Freedom-class Littoral Combat Ships, five Ticonderoga-class cruisers, two Los Angeles-class submarines, four Landing Dock Ships, two oilers and two Expeditionary Transfer Docks," the semi-official USNI [US Naval Institute] News reported on Monday.

The LCS ships could be scrapped in part because their anti-submarine warfare (ASW) mission was being taken over by the Constellation-class frigates, Navy Deputy Assistant Secretary for Budget Rear Admiral John Gumbleton told reporters at a Pentagon press conference. However, the first Constellation-class frigate is not scheduled to be delivered to the Navy until 2026 and is not expected to become fully operational until 2030, USNI News noted.

Acting Under Secretary of the Navy Meredith Berger told the press conference that scrapping the nine LCS vessels would also remove the burden of their "really costly repairs and maintenance."

The Navy will also be spending \$40.8 billion on 2 new DDG-51 Arleigh Burke class destroyers costing \$5.6 billion, one frigate costing \$1.3 billion and two Virginia class nuclear attack submarines costing \$7.3 billion, Gumbleton said.

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US Aims to Test Poland's Aegis Ashore Combat System in April - Senior Defense Official

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is on schedule to begin testing Poland's Aegis Ashore combat system in April, US Missile Defense Agency Director Vice Adm. Jon Hill said.

"We in close coordination with the Army Corps have gotten to the point where we've got a very predictable schedule now. So we've got the arrays in place, all of the Aegis equipment for the war-fighting capability to ashore now installed, it's all in place, and we start our testing campaign on the combat system coming up this next month," Hill said during a press conference on Monday.

Hill explained that the SM-3 Block 2A ballistic missile interceptor that Poland's Aegis Ashore will be equipped with is not designed to target strategic capabilities from Russia.

The US Defense Department previously said it expects the Aegis Ashore missile defense system it has provided for Poland will be completed and operational by the end of 2022.

In 2018, Poland signed an agreement with the United States worth nearly \$5 billion for air and missile defense systems to defend against missile threats from Iran, according to the Defense Department.

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US Senate Passes China Competition Bill, Progresses to Resolution With House Version

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US Senate passed the America COMPETES Act legislation to increase competitiveness with China on economic and national security matters, moving the bill forward to resolve differences with the House version.

The Senate passed the legislation in a vote of 68 to 28 on Monday.

This legislation would seek to ease supply chain bottlenecks on items like semiconductors and bring back manufacturing jobs to the United States, authorizing \$45 billion to improve US supply chains and prevent shortages of critical goods by ensuring more are made in the country.

The bill would also direct the Biden and subsequent administrations to submit a six-month review identifying areas of potential dialogue between the Chinese and US governments on ballistic, hypersonic, nuclear, space and cybers issues.

It similarly directs the US administration to develop a concrete plan to engage in arms control talks with China, and alternative plans to address arms control concerns should efforts to enter negotiations with Beijing fail.

To address China's presence in the Arctic, the bill would call on states in the region to reach an agreement to maintain peace and stability in the Arctic region and counter China's Polar Silk Road initiative, among others.

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Peskov Says Russia Sees NATO as 'Machine of Confrontation,' Not Cooperation

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Russia is convinced that NATO is a machine of confrontation and not cooperation, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told PBS in an interview.

"We're deeply convinced that the NATO machine is not a machine of cooperation, it is not a machine of security. It's a machine of confrontation," Peskov said on Monday.

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Kremlin Spokesman Says Russia Not Going to Send Gas Free of Charge to Western Europe

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Russia is not going to send natural gas to countries in Western Europe free of charge, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in an interview.

"Definitely we're not going to make a charity out of that to send gas free of charge to western Europe," Peskov said during an interview with PBS that aired on Monday when asked if Russia will cut off gas to countries refusing to pay in rubles.

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Kremlin Spokesman Says Biden's Remarks on Putin 'Alarming,' 'Personal Insult'

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said US President Joe Biden's remarks that Russian President Vladimir Putin "cannot remain in power" were alarming and represent a personal insult.

"It's quite alarming, first of all, it's a personal insult," Peskov said during an interview with PBS Newshour on Monday.

On Saturday, Biden said during a speech in Warsaw that Putin cannot remain in power, but the White House immediately tied to walk back his statement, saying the US president meant Putin must not decide for Ukraine.

Biden said on Monday that he was expressing his personal feelings toward Putin and not indicating a change in US policy.

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Trudeau, Ontario Premier Ford Announce Deal to Offer Inexpensive Childcare Through 2025

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Ontario Premier Doug Ford announced during a joint press conference that the federal and the provincial governments have signed a deal that will provide childcare at an average of \$10 per day through 2025 and also offer parents a retroactive decrease in their fees by 25 percent to a minimum of \$12 a day.

"Ontario's allocation was \$10.2 billion as we calculated almost a year ago and that's what this deal was. This plan offers choice and financial relief to families," Trudeau said on Monday. "We made a commitment to make sure that families across the country have affordable, \$10 a day, high-quality childcare spaces."

Trudeau said pulling the plan together was "not easily done," especially considering how difficult it is to be able to provide quality childcare. But that didn't stop the federal government from making a firm commitment "to get it done," he said. Trudeau also acknowledged the complexity of the task both governments are embarking on, but he said the federal government has invested historic amounts of money, engaged in "robust" conversations with leaders of the provinces and other stakeholders, and promised they will continue to create a system and build the infrastructure that will allow all families in Canada to benefit.

Ford said the Ontario government will focus on areas of need, including in high-priority neighborhoods and with respect to Indigenous people.

"We may have to [provide] infrastructure funds to add onto schools and building YMCAs. What is absolutely critical is more people willing to work in early childhood education. Frankly, they deserve more money. That's a special skillset and they deserve to be compensated more appropriately," Ford said.

Ontario government officials said that under the childcare agreement, fees for families will be reduced again in December thus bringing a total cut in the cost of daily daycare to 50% this year. Officials also said the childcare costs will be reduced again in September of 2024 and ultimately reach an average of \$10 a day by September 2025.

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Biden Requests \$60Bln for State Dept. in 2023 Proposed Budget Including Aid for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's budget proposal for fiscal year (FY) 2023 requests \$60.4 billion to support the missions of the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), including support for Ukraine, Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources Brian McKeon said.

"The President's FY2023 budget requests \$60.4 billion for the State Department and for the USAID," McKeon told reporters in a telephonic press briefing on Monday.

The United States is currently facing many ongoing challenges, including Russia's military operation in Ukraine, COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and "unprecedented humanitarian needs," he said.

Although the proposal does not contain humanitarian assistance counts for specific countries, McKeon noted that the sums were built on the US Congress' recent supplemental funding aimed to increase military and humanitarian support for Ukraine. It also provides additional aid to the United States' allies and partners in the region.

"US diplomacy and development efforts are more essential than ever to ensure American security and prosperity and uphold universal values," he said.

In addition, McKeon confirmed that this budget request has a goal to ensure the United States' security and prosperity, as well as to advance peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region and improve US positions in international organizations.

Earlier in the day, the White House rolled out Biden's \$5.8 trillion budget proposal for fiscal year 2023 that requests significant increases in funding for US national security.

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Biden Clarifies Remarks to US Forces, Says Contact With Ukrainians Would Occur in Poland

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden clarified recent remarks interpreted by some to mean a potential deployment of US forces to Ukraine, stating that his language was misinterpreted and he meant that American soldiers could come into contact with Ukrainians in Poland and not Ukraine itself.

Biden during a speech to members of the 82nd Airborne Division in Poland on Friday said that US troops will see many examples of Ukrainian bravery when they are "there."

"You interpret the language that way. I was talking to the troops. We were talking about helping train the Ukrainian troops that are in Poland... I was referring to being with and talking with the Ukrainian troops that are in Poland," Biden said on Monday when asked about the incident by a reporter.

Biden spoke to the US forces while visiting Poland for meetings with top Polish leadership on the situation in Ukraine and the role played by Warsaw in the ongoing humanitarian response. Prior to those meetings he also attended NATO, G7 and European Union meetings on Ukraine.

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Cyber Criminal Group Lapsus\$ Allegedly Breached US-Based Tech Firms Last Week - FBI

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The cyber criminal group Lapsus\$ allegedly hacked and stole data from several US-based tech companies last week, the FBI said.

"On March 21, 2022, individuals from a group identifying themselves as Lapsus\$ posted on a social media platform and alleged to have stolen source code from a number of United States-based technology companies," the FBI said in a press release on Monday.

The FBI explained the individuals behind the cyber criminal group have not been identified, but they claim to have stolen and released proprietary data obtained illegally.

The FBI said it is asking the public for information about the breach and to help the identify the individuals operating in Lapsus\$.

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US Growler Aircraft Deploying to Germany Not to Be Used to Fight Russian Forces - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The six US Navy EA-18G Growler aircraft scheduled to arrive at Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany this week will not be used to fight Russian forces in Ukraine but will be utilized to bolster NATO's defense posture on its eastern flank, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said.

"They are not being deployed to be used against Russian forces in Ukraine," Kirby said in a press release on Monday. "They are being deployed completely in keeping with our efforts to bolster NATO's deterrence and defense capabilities along that eastern flank."

The Growler is a specialized version of the US F-18 Super Hornet fighter jet that is equipped to fly electronic warfare missions using a suite of jamming sensors to confuse enemy radars, which aids in the ability to conduct suppression of enemy air defense operations, Kirby said.

Some 240 Navy personnel will deploy to Germany consisting of pilots and maintenance crew, Kirby added.

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US Stocks Up as Oil, Bond Yields Drop Allaying Some Inflation Fears

NEW YORK, March 28 (Sputnik) - US stocks rose broadly for a third session in a row on Monday after oil prices tumbled and Treasury yields fell, allaying some investor concerns over inflation.

Wall Street's three stock indexes - the S&P 500, the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Nasdaq Composite - closed up 0.8% on the average. Nasdaq, which houses the biggest technology names of the world, including Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Googl, rose more than 1% on its own to lead gains.

The US ten-year Treasury note, which serves as an indicator of "real inflation," fell 1.2%.

Oil prices, meanwhile, tumbled 7% in Monday's official session, reacting to China's lockdown of its Shanghai financial hub over a COVID-19 scare. The market fell further in post-settlement trade on a Financial Times report that Russia was no longer demanding Ukraine be de-Nazified in ceasefire talks.

But the head of the Russian delegation to the talks, Vladimir Medinsky, told reporters that a Moscow-Kyiv agreement without Ukraine's demilitarization, de-Nazification and recognition of Crimea and the two breakaway republics in the Donbas, will be unlikely.

Some equities analysts warned that trading on Wall Street could remain volatile this week with investors awaiting multiple speeches on the economy and monetary policy from Federal Reserve officials, before Friday's all-important US jobs report for March.

"It's been a bumpy start to the trading week as bond yields remain elevated as inflation fears continue to chip away whatever solid footing remains for the US economy," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "Wall Street might be poised for some sideways price action for equities given all the persistent uncertainty with geopolitical risks."

US inflation, measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), grew 7.0% in 2021, and 7.9% during the year to February - both at their fastest in four decades. The CPI's expansion outpaces economic growth at 5.7% last year and projected at 2.8% this year.

The Federal Reserve, whose tolerance for inflation is a mere 2% per year, has vowed to bring inflation back to its target with a series of rate hikes through 2023.

In Monday's trade, the S&P 500 - which groups the top 500 US stocks - closed up 32 points, or 0.7%, at 4,575.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which lists travel, aviation and cross-industry value stocks, rose 95 points, or 0.3%, to settle at 34,956.

The Nasdaq Composite finished up 186 points, or 1.3%, at 14,355.

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Oil Ends Down 7% on China Covid Scare

NEW YORK, March 28 (Sputnik) - Oil prices tumbled 7 percent after China's lockdown of its Shanghai financial hub over a Covid scare, and the market fell further in after-hours trade. London-traded Brent, the global oil benchmark, settled the official session down \$8.17, or 6.8%, at \$112.48 per barrel on Monday. It fell to as low as \$108.53 during the regular session. In post-settlement trade, Brent fell almost \$11 to trade at under \$107 by 3:45 PM ET (19:45 GMT). New York-traded US crude benchmark West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, settled down \$7.94, or 7%, at \$105.96. WTI hit a low of \$104.52 during the regular session. In post-settlement trade, the US crude benchmark lost more than \$11, trading at under \$103.

Oil prices tumbled earlier in the day after number two oil consumer China locked down Shanghai in two stages to carry out testing over an eight-day period, following a new daily record for asymptomatic Omicron infections.

It was the biggest Covid-related disruption to hit Shanghai, and sent prices of copper tumbling as well on fears that any further curbs could hurt demand in China, which is also the world's second-largest economy. As late as Saturday, Shanghai's authorities denied there would be a lockdown as the city pursued a more piecemeal "slicing and gridding" approach to try and rein in its Omicron breakout.

The energy minister of the United Arab Emirates Suhail Mohamed Al-Mazrouei, however, limited the market's downside by allaying concerns that OPEC+ might be tempted to overcompensate the present crude shortage by raising production beyond its standard monthly increment of 400,000 barrels per day.

Without digging into OPEC+ capacity - and notwithstanding the politics of the moment - Mazroui tried suggesting that Europe should reconsider its plan to ditch Russian energy imports.

Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz said earlier in the day that Europe's largest economy might proceed this year itself with its cut off from Russian coal and oil, despite its heavy reliance on these.

"Russia is an important member (of OPEC+) and leaving the politics aside, this volume is needed today," Mazroui said in an interview with Asharq Business. "Unless someone is willing to bring 10 million barrels a day to the table we don't see how one can substitute Russia."

The UAE energy minister also tried to appease some of the dismay of the consuming countries by stating that OPEC+ is "not happy with higher crude prices". But Mazroui also said the alliance "can't oversupply the market", adding that raising production could only be done in a measured and consensual manner among OPEC+ members."

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) -

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA, BELARUS

* The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development announced the closure of its offices in Moscow and Minsk.

* US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong discussed targeted financial sanctions against Russia for its special military operation in Ukraine, the Treasury Department said.

* US lawmakers have requested that Credit Suisse Group provide information related to the bank's compliance with sanctions imposed on Russian businessmen, The Wall Street Journal reported.

RUSSIA-UKRAINE TALKS

- * Talks between delegations of Russia and Ukraine will start in Istanbul at 10:30 local time (07:30 GMT) on Tuesday and will be closed for media, a source told Sputnik on Monday.
- * Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he would hold talks with the delegations of Moscow and Kiev before their meeting in Istanbul.
- * UN Humanitarian Coordinator Martin Griffiths will hopefully travel to Moscow and Kiev soon to engage in talks on the possibility of a humanitarian ceasefire in Ukraine, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said.
- * A meeting between Russian president Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is needed as soon as there is clarity on key issues, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

BIDEN'S REMARKS ON PUTIN

- * US President Joe Biden said on Monday that he will not walk back recent comments challenging the continued leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin, arguing that the comments were made based on personal feelings and do not indicate any policy changes.
- * Biden said that the possibility of a meeting between him and Putin would depend on what the latter wants to talk about.
- * Biden said on Putin's behavior has changed since their meeting in Geneva last June where they had a "normal discussion" about launching a strategic dialogue.

ENERGY MARKETS

- * Russia's decision to demand payment for gas in rubles will not affect the business of the French oil and gas company TotalEnergies, since it does not apply to liquefied natural gas, the company told RIA Novosti.
- * German Energy Minister Robert Habeck said that the G7 countries reject Russia's demand regarding ruble payments for energy resources, AP reported.
- * The European Union believes it is possible to reduce demand for Russian fossil fuels by two-thirds within a year, the European Commission spokesman for energy, Tim McPhie, said.
- * Germany does not support a boycott on energy supplies from Russia under the current conditions, German government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit said.
- * The mechanism of settlements between European countries and Russia in switching to payments rubles for Russian energy will be clarified soon, Russian Permanent Representative to the EU Vladimir Chizhov said.

US BUDGET PROPOSAL

- * President Joe Biden's budget proposal for 2023 requests \$10.6 billion to bolster the United States' role in addressing global health security challenges and \$11 billion for international climate finance, documents revealed on Monday.
- * The Biden administration projects a deficit of \$1.4 trillion or 5.8% of GDP for 2022, according to the 2023 budget request released by the White House.
- * Biden is seeking \$1 billion in assistance to Ukraine for the Department of State and Defense Department to counter Russia, the fiscal year 2023 budget request revealed.
- * Biden's budget proposal for 2023 requests \$6.9 billion for the European deterrence initiative, NATO, and countering Russia's influence in the region, the budget request revealed.

- * Biden is proposing a new 20% minimum tax on billionaire, the budget request revealed.
- * Biden's budget proposal for 2023 requests \$6.9 billion for the European deterrence initiative, NATO, and countering Russia's influence in the region, according to the budget request.

MACEDONIA EXPELLS RUSSIAN DIPLOMATS

- * Macedonia has decided to declare five Russian diplomats personae non gratae, the television broadcaster Alsat reported on Monday, citing sources.
- * Russia is forced to take retaliatory measures for the expulsion of its diplomats from Macedonia, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

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Trudeau Discusses Canadian Support for Ukraine, Russia Sanctions With Zelenskyy - Readout

TORONTO, March 28 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy discussed by telephone Canada's support for Kiev amid the Russian special military operation and additional sanctions against Moscow, the Prime Minister's Office said in a readout of the conversation on Monday.

"The Prime Minister and President discussed the continuing Russian military aggression and the devastating impacts to Ukraine's people, infrastructure, and economy. Both leaders discussed next steps in terms of required support to Ukraine, to include humanitarian, financial, and military support as well as further sanctions against Russia," the readout said.

Trudeau reaffirmed Canada's steadfast support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, and Zelenskyy thanked him for the ongoing assistance, the readout added.

Trudeau and Zelenskyy agreed during the call to keep in close touch, according too the readout.

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US Treasury Proposes New Undertaxed Profits Law to Enforce 15% Global Minimum Tax

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department has proposed a new undertaxed profits law for multinational corporations to help enforce the 15% global minimum corporate tax, a documented breakdown of the plan showed on Monday.

The Undertaxed Profits Rule (UTPR) is subject to Congressional approval and would operate as a "top-up tax" for businesses to ensure they pay the 15% worldwide minimum corporate tax, according to the plan. It will also prevent taxpayers from deducting taxes paid in countries that do not have a global minimum tax.

"When another jurisdiction adopts a UTPR, the proposal also includes a domestic minimum top-up tax that would protect US revenues from the imposition of UTPR by other countries," the Treasury Department said in the breakdown of its planned revenue streams in 2023.

At the push of the United States, some 130 countries led by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development agreed in July last year to have a global minimum corporate tax of 15%.

President Joe Biden has long been an advocate of closing a US tax loophole that allows corporations to locate their tax bases in countries and territories with zero or low rates while maintaining their corporate activities and operations in the United States.

The Treasury Department said it has worked into its tax proposal mechanisms to ensure that US firms that were on hook for higher taxes benefited from all domestic tax credits and other incentives.

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Biden Asks Congress for \$97Bln to Enhance Border Security, Protect Homeland - DHS Chief

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's FY 2023 funding proposal includes a request for an additional \$6.5 billion for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), potentially lifting the agency budget to \$97.3 billion, which will ensure the US has the tools to keep Americans safe, DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said Monday.

Earlier in the day, the White House rolled out US President Joe Biden's \$5.8 trillion budget proposal for fiscal year 2023, which requests increases including substantial funding for US national security.

"This budget of \$97.3 billion will ensure they [DHS personnel] have the tools necessary to safeguard the American people, our homeland, and our values," Mayorkas said in a statement.

"The budget makes smart investments in technology to keep our borders secure and includes funding that will allow us to process asylum claims more efficiently as we build a safe, orderly, and humane immigration system."

According to the proposal released by the White House, the budget for DHS would include \$1 billion for cybersecurity, \$11.5 billion for the Coast Guard, \$15.3 billion for US Customs and Border Protection, and \$8.1 billion for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Mayorkas said the funding will support critical work to protect the traveling public by ensuring the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) workforce is paid on par with other federal personnel.

"The Budget will support our work to protect communities from today's complex threats by doubling funding for the Non-Profit Security Grant Program and investing in DHS's anti-human trafficking efforts," Mayorkas.

According to the statement, the DHS budget to protect houses of worship and other nonprofits will double to \$360 million. He pushed for additional funding following the Colleyville synagogue hostage crisis in late January. Meanwhile, the DHS Center for Countering Human Trafficking will receive \$18 million, according to the release.

Victim Assistance Program could see a \$12 million bump to hire 59 victim assistance specialists who will handle a range of crimes including human trafficking, child exploitation, child sex crimes, white collar crimes, and human rights abuses, the release added.

The budget proposes a 4.6 percent increase in pay for military and civilian employees with with \$1.5 billion allocated to the TSA for collective bargaining, pay equity, and merit systems protection for the workforce.

If approved, the budget will strengthen DHS' disaster preparedness and climate resilience by providing more than \$26 billion to bolster America's responses to natural and other disasters; improve the national disaster infrastructure; put in place disaster-preparedness plans and approaches; and lessen the impact and effects of climate change by harnessing community partnerships, according to the release.

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Academy Says Condemns Actor Will Smith's Attack During Oscars Ceremony, Launches Probe

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences condemns actor Will Smith's attack on comedian Chris Rock during the 94th "Oscars" Academy Awards ceremony, the organization said on Monday in a statement quoted by US media.

"The Academy condemns the actions of Mr. Smith at last night's show. We have officially started a formal review around the incident and will explore further action and consequences in accordance with our Bylaws, Standards of Conduct and California law," the statement said. Smith walked on stage and struck Brown's face after the comedian made a joke about his wife, Jada Pinkett Smith's, shaved head. Jada has alopecia, an autoimmune disorder that can cause baldness.

"Jada I love you, 'G.I. Jane 2,' can't wait to see it," Brown said moments before the incident. Smith shortly afterwards won the Best Actor Oscar for his role in the movie "King Richard," upon receiving of which he delivered a short speech addressing the incident and arguing he was standing up for his family.

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UN Chief Calls for De-Escalation of Rhetoric After Biden's Remarks About Putin

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Monday called for de-escalating rhetoric following US President Joe Biden's remarks about Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Wrapping up his European tour in Poland on Saturday, Biden said in his speech on Ukraine that President Putin "cannot remain in power" and called him a "butcher." Later, a White House official said that Biden's words about Putin were not endorsing regime change in Russia.

"I think that we need de-escalation. We need military de-escalation and rhetoric de-escalation," Guterres told reporters when asked about Biden's statements.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has called Biden's remarks "alarming."

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Biden Says Putin's Behavior Has Changed Since Geneva Meeting

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Monday Russian President Vladimir Putin's behavior has changed since their meeting in Geneva last June where they had a "normal discussion" about launching a strategic dialogue.

"I don't know what changed his mind. His [Putin's] behavior has changed. When we met [in Geneva], remember what we were talking about? We were talking about setting up a strategic dialogue and talking about the relationship of NATO and Russia and facing off in the regions and how we can have more transparency and all the rest. It was a normal discussion," Biden said during his remarks on the new budget proposal.

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Biden on Whether He Would Meet With Putin: It Depends on What He Wants to Talk About

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday that the possibility of a meeting between him and Russian President Vladimir Putin would depend on what the latter wants to talk about.

"It depends on what he wants to talk about," Biden said during a press conference when asked if he would be willing to meet with Putin.

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Biden Says Not Walking Back Putin Comments, Was Expressing 'Moral Outrage' Not US Policy

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday that he will not walk back recent comments challenging the continued leadership of Russian President Vladimir Putin, arguing that the comments were made based on personal feelings and do not indicate any policy changes.

"I'm not walking anything back ... I was expressing the moral outrage I felt. I wasn't articulating a policy change," Biden told reporters when asked about the comments following remarks on the new FY2023 budget proposal.

Biden also expressed that he does not believe the comments will escalate tensions or complicate diplomatic engagement between the United States and Russia.

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About 40 Vehicles Collide on Snowy Highway in Pennsylvania - Officials

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - About 40 vehicles have collided on a snowy highway in the US state of Pennsylvania, the Schuylkill County Office of Emergency Management said on Monday.

"We had an accident that started around 10.30 this morning with approximately 40 vehicles involved," John Blickley, the deputy emergency management coordinator for the agency, said. A snow squall is likely to have clouded visibility and contributed to the accident, according to the officials.

Meanwhile, the National Weather Service warned of "numerous brief heavy snow squalls with very poor visibility."

"The squalls will quickly reduce the visibility to under one-half of a mile and coat the roads with snow," forecasters said, calling on drivers to gradually slow down to avoid a chain reaction vehicular accident.

No fatalities have been reported, but Blickley said that about 20 people were taken to hospitals for treatment.

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Blinken, Saudi Counterpart Discuss Ukraine, Peace Process in Yemen – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Saudi counterpart, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, discussed Ukraine and efforts to bring comprehensive peace to Yemen, the Department of State said on Monday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with the Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud ... [T]hey discussed support for the UN's proposal for a Ramadan truce in Yemen and efforts to launch a new, more inclusive and comprehensive peace process," the Department of State said in a press release. "[The officials] discussed building strong international support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity while holding President Putin accountable for his unprovoked and unlawful war."

Blinken underscored that Washington remains committed to bolstering Saudi Arabia's defense against regional threats and stressed the importance of protecting civilians in Yemen, the release added.

On Friday, Yemen's Houthi movement attacked an oil distribution station in Jeddah and civilian facilities, including an electric power station, in several other Saudi cities. Later the same day, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition said it had destroyed two booby-trapped drones launched by the Houthis toward the kingdom.

On Saturday, the Houthis said they are ready to establish a ceasefire for a period of three days and could consider making it permanent if Saudi Arabia ends the blockade and airstrikes, and withdraws all forces from Yemen.

Yemen has been gripped by an internal conflict between the government forces and the Houthi movement. Since 2015, the Saudi-led coalition fighting on the Yemeni government's side has been conducting air, land and sea operations against the rebels. The Houthis often retaliate by firing projectiles and drones toward Saudi territory. Earlier this month, the Houthis intensified their shelling of the kingdom after the latter executed 82 people, including three Yemeni prisoners of war.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine responding to calls for help from the Donbas republics in defending themselves against the aggression of Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, but later accused Ukrainian forces of using typical terrorist methods, such as hiding behind civilians and positioning weapons systems in civilian areas.

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Biden Budget to Boost US Leadership in Manned Spaceflight to Moon, Mars - NASA Chief

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's \$26 billion budget request for space programs will maintain US leadership in manned space flight and fund programs to return to the Moon and reach Mars, NASA announced in a fact sheet on Monday.

"With the \$26.0 billion provided in the FY [Fiscal Year] 2023 Budget request (4.7% increase over FY 2022 President's request and 8% increase over FY 2022 enacted) NASA will Enable Moon to Mars exploration and bolster United States leadership in human spaceflight with \$7.478 billion (a \$687 million increase over FY 2022)," the space agency said.

NASA Administrator Bill Nelson confirmed that the program is planned to return US astronauts to the Moon as early as 2025.

The new budget provides \$2.4 billion to address the global climate crisis and will also support continued human presence in low-Earth orbit with operations of the International Space Station (ISS) through 2030 and \$224 million to initiate transition from ISS to a new era of commercial space stations in the late 2020s, NASA said.

The new budget will advance robotic exploration of the Moon and Mars, including \$486 million for lunar science missions and \$822 million for Mars Sample Return, NASA added.

The new budget also provides almost \$7.5 billion for Deep Space Exploration Systems, a 10.8% increase over the administration's Fiscal Year 2022 request, according to NASA.

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US Prioritizes China as Top Security Threat, Views Russia as 'Acute' Challenge - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The United States is prioritizing China as its top national security threat and views Russia as an acute threat, the Defense Department said on Monday. "The FY23 President's Budget allows DoD to develop, procure, and modernize capabilities to ensure combat-credible forces across all domains to address the pacing challenge from the People's Republic of China and to address acute threats from Russia," the budget document said.

During a press briefing with three Pentagon officials earlier in the day, US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks said China is the most consequential strategic competitor.

The Pentagon officials talked also accused Russia of pursuing a "political, economic, and military strategy that seeks to "fracture NATO."

The budget also says to counter Russia, the Defense Department 2023 request seeks to optimize Joint Force responsiveness to deter challenges in the US European Command area of responsibility through investments that enhance US partners' readiness and capabilities in the region.

The budget specifically requests about \$5.1 billion to address security and strategic challenges posed by Russia in Europe.

The Defense Department seeks \$6.1 billion for the United States' deterrence initiative in the Pacific, which includes integrated fires, new missile warning and tracking architecture, construction to enable enhanced posture, funding for Defense of Guam, and multinational information sharing, training, and experimentation.

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US Defense Department Seeks \$34.4Bln to Modernize Nuclear Triad - Budget

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon said on Monday it is requesting \$34.4 billion to modernize the United States' nuclear triad.

"\$34.4 billion for Nuclear Enterprise Modernization: Modernizing the Nation's nuclear deterrence capability remains one of the Department's top priorities," the Defense Department said in its budget rollout.

The Defense Department said the budget fully funds the Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine, ramps up production funding for the B-21 bomber, and fully funds both the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent and Long Range Standoff programs to maintain initial fielding dates. The US Army aims to field a hypersonic missile battery by 2023, the US Navy plans to field a hypersonic missile battery by 2025, and the US Air Force plans to field hypersonic missiles by 2027, the Defense Department said.

The budget would also allocate \$24.7 billion for missile defense.

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Biden Seeks \$15Bln Over 10 Years for Election Assistance in US - 2023 Budget Proposal

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is proposing a total of \$15 billion in election assistance funding, to be spread out over ten years, to boost polling infrastructure and vote-by-mail, the White House's budget proposal for fiscal year 2023 said on Monday.

"As America's democracy faces threats across the nation, the state, county, and municipal governments that run federal elections have struggled to obtain resources commensurate with the improved access and security that voters expect and deserve," the budget proposal released by the White House said. "To provide state and local election officials with a predictable funding stream for critical capital investments and increased staffing and services, the budget proposes \$10 billion in new elections assistance funding to be allocated over ten years." The budget proposal noted that federal government funding for the equipment, systems and personnel that comprise the nation's critical election infrastructure has been episodic or crisis-driven.

Biden also proposed \$5 billion for the US Postal Service (USPS) to expand delivery capacity in "underserved areas and support for vote-by-mail, including making ballots postage free and reducing the cost of other election-related mail."

Voting by mail rose sharply in the November 2020 election, accounting for 46% of votes, up from 21% in the 2016 election, the USPS Inspector General said.

Voting by mail also became controversial in the 2020 election when then president Donald Trump alleged postal vote fraud that resulted in the filing of lawsuits and ultimately a challenge to the election victory of Biden, that was later upheld by electoral officials and Congress.

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Biden Requests \$26Bln in Discretionary Funding for Space Program NASA - US 2023 Budget (Updates with more details, background in paras 1-8; modifies headline)

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has requested \$26 billion in discretionary funding for US space program NASA in his 2023 budget proposal that plans among other things to land the first woman and person of color on the Moon, a breakdown of the budget proposal released by the White House on Monday said.

"The Budget requests \$26 billion in discretionary funding for NASA, a \$2.7 billion or 11.6-percent increase from the 2021 enacted level," the White House said in a fact sheet on the budget.

A more detailed breakdown of the budget proposal stated that roughly \$7.5 billion was being set aside for the Artemis lunar exploration project within NASA, which is known in full as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Artemis is involved in the development of a new lunar lander capable of taking humans to and from the lunar surface.

"Artemis would return American astronauts to the Moon as early as 2025, land the first woman and person of color on the Moon, deepen the Nation's scientific understanding of the Moon, and test technologies that would allow humans to safely and sustainably explore Mars," the budget

proposal said. "Lunar landing missions would also include astronauts from international partners."

The Verge publication noted that in order to get humans back to the Moon, NASA has been working on three key pieces of hardware. The first two include a megarocket called the Space Launch System, or SLS, and a crew capsule called Orion. The pair have been in development for the last decade and are designed to work together to take humans to the vicinity of the Moon. The third critical item needed to complete the journey is a lunar lander. Last year, NASA awarded SpaceX a \$2.9 billion contract to develop the company's new Starship vehicle into a lander for Artemis.

The budget also proposed to set aside \$779 million to develop NASA's lunar Gateway, a new space station the agency hopes to build in orbit around the Moon. Ultimately, the Gateway is meant to serve as a hub for the Artemis program where astronauts can live and train before going down to the lunar surface. The first piece of this project is supposed to launch in 2024. Along with hardware for human missions, the new budget request calls for an additional \$486 million to fund robotic lunar missions to help better understand the Moon's terrain. One such mission includes the VIPER rover to "investigate ice deposits that could provide future astronauts with fuel and oxygen." Some of that funding will also go toward NASA's established partnerships with private companies like Intuitive Machines and Astrobotic, which are sending robotic landers to the Moon as early as this year.

Apart from Artemis, the White House is setting aside \$224 million to encourage the development of new commercial space stations in low Earth orbit, where the International Space Station currently resides. At the end of last year, the Biden administration announced plans to continue operations of the International Space Station through 2030. But eventually, that program will end, and the agency wants private space stations to be ready as replacement destinations for astronauts when that time comes.

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NASA Continues Professional, Working Relationship With Russia - Chief

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The professional relationship between US astronauts and Russian cosmonauts on the International Space Station (ISS) continues to function, despite political tensions on earth between their two countries over the Ukraine crisis, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said in a podcast on Monday.

"Astronaut Mark Vande Hei is coming home on Wednesday after 355 days in space and he's coming home with his Russian crew and the working relationship between NASA and our international partners continues and that includes the professional relationship between our astronauts and cosmonauts," Nelson said.

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Canada Picks Lockheed Martin as Top Bidder to Supply 88 F-35 Fighter Jets - Minister

TORONTO, March 28 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has picked Lockheed Martin as a preferred bidder to supply 88 new F-35 fighter jets, Minister of Public Services and Procurement Filomena Tassi announced on Monday.

"This morning, officials informed me that the top rank bidder is Lockheed Martin and officials will now enter into the finalization phase of the process with Lockheed Martin," Tassi said during a press briefing.

The Canadian minister clarified that the final contract for the supply of 88 advanced fighter jets has not been signed yet as there is still work ahead before the contract can be awarded.

The project to purchase 88 new fighter jets will become the largest investment in the modernization of the Canadian Air Force in over 30 years, Tassi noted.

In July 2020, Canada received three proposals to replace its aging fighter jet fleet. US bids were represented by defense giants Lockheed Martin Corporation and The Boeing Company while the Swedish bid was led by SAAB AB.

The initial F-35 contract with Lockheed Martin was scrapped in 2016, with Canada having to pay exuberant cancellation fees and a number of Canadian suppliers to the development of the F-35 being excluded from the project.

According to reports, the expected cost of the purchase is between \$11.2 billion and \$14.2 billion. Delivery of the first aircraft is expected as early as 2025.

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Pentagon Accounting for Inflation in New Fiscal Year 2023 Budget - Senior Official

*WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department is accounting for the impact of inflation on the armed forces and its service members in the new fiscal year 2023 budget, Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks said on Monday.

"We obviously are seeing inflationary pressure here in 2022... The 2023 budget starts in October and goes out 12 months past that, so we will at the same time be looking over the summer at where exactly inflation lands and how inflation ends up affecting our service members," Hicks said during a press briefing.

In response to the increase in inflation, the Defense Department put a 4.6% pay raise for both military and civilian personnel - the largest raise in 20 years - into the budget, Hicks also said.

The proposed budget put out by the White House earlier on Monday requests \$773 billion in discretionary funding for the Defense Department - an increase of \$69 billion or 9.8% from 2021 levels.

President Joe Biden issued a statement saying the move is one of the largest national security investments in the nation's history.

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Singapore Signs Artemis Accords to Join US-Led Cooperation in Space - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - Singapore has signed the Artemis Accords to join the US-led initiative to promote international cooperation and the imposition of a rules-based order in space, the State Department announced in a media note on Monday.

"Today ... Minister for Trade and Industry Gan Kim Yong signed the Artemis Accords on behalf of the Republic of Singapore in a ceremony in Washington, DC," the note said.

Led by the State Department and NASA, the Artemis Accords are grounded in the 1967 Outer Space Treaty and promote values-based cooperation and encourage responsible and safe behavior in space. Those principles also underpin NASA's Artemis Program, which seeks to land the first woman and person of color on the Moon, the note said.

"Singapore is the 18th country to sign the Accords, joining Australia, Bahrain, Brazil, Canada, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Republic of [South] Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, Romania, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States," the note added.

In August 2021, as part of Vice President Kamala Harris's trip to Singapore, the United States and Singapore agreed on the importance of creating a safe and transparent environment that facilitates space exploration, science, and commercial activities for all of humanity to enjoy, according to the note.

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Biden Proposes \$15Bln Over 10 Years for Election Assistance in US

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is proposing \$15 billion in funding for election assistance over ten years to boost polling infrastructure and vote-by-mail, the White House's budget proposal for 2023 said on Monday.

"As America's democracy faces threats across the nation, the state, county and municipal governments that run federal elections have struggled to obtain resources commensurate with the improved access and security that voters expect and deserve," said a copy of the budget proposal released by the White House. "To provide state and local election officials with a predictable funding stream for critical capital investments and increased staffing and services, the budget proposes \$10 billion in new elections assistance funding to be allocated over ten years."

The budget proposal noted that federal funding for the equipment, systems, and personnel that comprise the nation's critical election infrastructure has been episodic or crisis-driven.

Biden also proposed \$5 billion for the US Postal Service (USPS) to expand delivery capacity in "underserved areas and support for vote-by-mail, including making ballots postage free and reducing the cost of other election-related mail."

Voting by mail rose sharply in the November 2020 election, accounting for 46% of votes, up from 21% in the 2016 election, the USPS Inspector General said.

Voting by mail also became controversial in the 2020 election when then president Donald Trump alleged postal vote fraud that resulted in the filing of lawsuits and ultimately a challenge to the election victory of Biden, that was later held by electoral officials and Congress.

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Biden Unveils \$5.8 Trillion Budget Request for 2023 - White House

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The White House on Monday rolled out US President Joe Biden's \$5.8 budget proposal for fiscal year 2023, which requests increases in funding for Ukraine and initiatives to address global health security challenges, including substantial funding for US national security interests in the Indo-Pacific region to counter China and to bolster the United States' European Deterrence Initiative to counter Russia.

The White House said in the budget proposal that Biden is calling for providing Ukraine with \$682 million in assistance, an increase of \$219 million above the 2021 enacted level, to counter Russia's influence and to meet emerging needs related to security, energy, cybersecurity issues, disinformation, macroeconomic stabilization and civil society resilience

The budget proposal also requests \$6.9 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative, NATO and countering Russia's influence in the region.

Biden also seeks nearly \$1.8 billion to support a free and open Indo-Pacific region and \$400 million to counter China's influence.

The budget proposal for 2023 requests \$10.6 billion to bolster the United States' role in addressing global health security challenges and \$11 billion for international climate finance.

Moreover, Biden has increased NASA's budget for space exploration by more than \$1 billion to \$7.5 billion in his fiscal year 2023 budget proposal.

"The budget provides \$7.5 billion, \$1.1 billion above the 2021 enacted level, for Artemis lunar exploration," the proposal said.

Artemis would return US astronauts to the Moon as early as 2025 for the first time since 1972, land the first woman and person of color on the Moon and deepen scientific understanding of the Moon, the budget proposal said. The program would also test technologies that would allow humans to safely and sustainably explore Mars. Later lunar landing missions would also include astronauts from international partners, the president's proposal said.=

In addition, Biden requested \$26 billion in discretionary funding for NASA in his fiscal year 2023 budget proposal.

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Ontario Lawmaker Faces Nine Charges Over Ottawa Convoy Protest – Reports

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – Randy Hillier, an independent member of Ontario's Legislative Assembly, turned himself in on Monday after police filed nine charges against him in connection with his alleged activities during freedom convoy protests in Ottawa and some of his social media posts, media reported on Monday.

"It's been deemed that I have to prove that I'm not a danger to society to have my freedom," he told reporters before entering police headquarters. "We'll see what happens."

Among the charges against Hillier, 64, are assaulting and obstructing/resisting an officer; mischief; counselling an indictable offence and counselling an uncommitted indictable offence, according to the Toronto Star newspaper. He is expected to appear in court later on Monday for what he describes as expressing himself, which he says is a fundamental freedom allowed to Canadians.

Hillier has served as a member of provincial parliament since 2007, but the Ontario Progressive Conservative caucus kicked him out in 2019. He announced this month that he will not seek re-election. His Twitter account was suspended earlier in March for posts about COVID-19 that Twitter deemed deceptive and potentially harmful.

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Canada's Indigenous Leaders Meet With Pope, Seek Apology for Children's Abuse - Reports

TORONTO, March 28 (Sputnik) - A delegation of Canada's Indigenous leaders and survivors of mistreatment in the country's residential schools met with Pope Francis at the Vatican where they provided the Pontiff their personal accounts of being among the 150,000 children subjected to cruelty and abuse by Catholic priests and school employees, the Canadian Broadcasting Company reported on Monday.

The Pope listened attentively and nodded along as the survivors told their stories of how they were subjected to abuse, the report cited Metis National Council President Cassidy Caron as saying.

The delegation sought an apology from the Pope on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church and a commitment to repair the decades of considerable harm done to Indigenous children, but the Pontiff did neither, the report said.

An Inuit leaders and survivors is scheduled to meet with the Pope today and a First Nations delegation is scheduled to meet him on Thursday, while the entire group will then attend a more formal audience for the Pope will deliver an address.

From more mid-1800s until the 1970s, the Canadian government forcefully removed more than 150,000 Indigenous children from their homes and placed them in state-funded mostly Catholic schools. The Children were beaten for speaking their native languages, maltreated because they were considered inferior, sexually assaulted and brutalized while being Christianized. An

undetermined number of them died and were buried in graves at residential schools across Canada.

The meetings with the Pope are an attempt by the Canadian church and government to respond to the sustained demands for justice by the Indigenous people, including achieving reconciliation and being afforded reparations. The demands have gained currency since the discovery in the past couple of years of hundreds of unmarked children's graves on the schools' grounds.

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UN, African Union Launch Efforts to Support Political Process in Sudan – Envoy
WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) – The United Nations and the African Union are launching efforts to support an inclusive political process in Sudan, UN Special Representative for Sudan Volker Perthes said on Monday.

"I am pleased to announce to this Council that the United Nations, the African Union, and IGAD [Intergovernmental Authority on Development] have agreed to joint efforts in supporting Sudan in the next phase of political process," Perthes said.

All three organizations made commitments to facilitate an inclusive political process led by the Sudanese, he added.

This process should involve women and focus on a number of urgent priorities to address the crisis and restore constitutional order, the envoy noted.

These priorities should include internal constitutional arrangements, the criteria and mechanisms to appoint the government, and a roadmap for the transitional period with the election at the end of the process, the UN official explained.

"We expect to start an intensive phase of talks in the next couple of weeks," Perthes said.

The military grabbed power in Sudan and ousted the government of Abdalla Hamdok last fall. In late November, the civilian and military authorities reached a deal to form a technocratic government and return Hamdok to power. The deal also provided for the release of all political prisoners. The political crisis persisted and Hamdok stepped down on January 2, 2022 against the backdrop of protests against the military rule.

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US Judge Says Trump Likely Committed Obstruction of Congress on January 6, 2021 - Ruling

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US district judge David Carter said on Monday that former US President Donald Trump likely committed obstruction of Congress on January 6, 2021, according to a court ruling.

"Based on the evidence, the Court finds it more likely than not that President Trump corruptly attempted to obstruct the Joint Session of Congress on January 6, 2021," the statement said.

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US Treasury Chief Discusses Russia Sanctions With Singaporean Prime Minister - Readout

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong discussed targeted financial sanctions against Russia for its special military operation in Ukraine, the Treasury Department said on Monday.

"Secretary Yellen affirmed the United States' support for Ukraine's sovereignty and underscored the importance of the international community holding Russia accountable for its unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine, including through the implementation of targeted financial sanctions," the Treasury Department said in a readout of the conversation.

Yellen and Loong also discussed US-Singapore bilateral relations, US economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific region and the global economic outlook, the readout said.

In addition, Yellen welcomed Singapore's cooperation on issues such as climate change, according to the readout.

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Biden Seeks to Significantly Boost US Agencies' Budgets to Reduce Energy Costs - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The White House seeks billions of dollars in new funding in its fiscal year 2023 budget proposal to enable three federal agencies to administer requisite programs and reduce energy costs, CNN reported on Monday citing sources.

The Biden administration is taking multiple different approaches across the departments and agencies to reduce energy costs, and is pulling out all the stops to do so, the report said.

The administration's budget proposals seeks \$48.2 billion for the Energy Department, \$11.9 billion for the Environmental Protection Agency and \$17.6 billion for the the Interior Department, the report said.

The US Congress has a final say and it rarely approves all items and amounts US presidents ask for in their budget requests.

Earlier on Monday, US media reported that the Biden administration will propose more than \$32 billion in new spending to fund police.

The police funding proposal will include \$20.6 billion for the next fiscal year in Justice Department discretionary spending on law enforcement and crime prevention, \$2 billion more than the sum allocated for the current fiscal year.

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Biden Boosts NASA Space, Moon Exploration Budget by Over \$1Bln - Fiscal Proposal

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has increased NASA's budget for space exploration by more than \$1 billion to \$7.5 billion in his fiscal year 2023 budget proposal, the budgetary financial request submitted to Congress revealed on Monday.

"The budget provides \$7.5 billion, \$1.1 billion above the 2021 enacted level, for Artemis lunar exploration," the proposal said.

Artemis would return US astronauts to the Moon as early as 2025 for the first time since 1972, land the first woman and person of color on the Moon and deepen scientific understanding of the Moon, the budget proposal said.

The program would also test technologies that would allow humans to safely and sustainably explore Mars. Later lunar landing missions would also include astronauts from international partners, the president's proposal said.

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Biden Requests \$26Bln in Discretionary Funding for NASA

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has requested \$26 billion in discretionary funding for NASA in his 2023 budget proposal, the White House announced on Monday.

"The Budget requests \$26 billion in discretionary funding for NASA, a \$2.7 billion or 11.6-percent increase from the 2021 enacted level," the White House said in a fact sheet on the President's Budget for financial year 2022.

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Biden Seeks \$1Bln for US State Dept., Pentagon to Assist Ukraine Counter Russia - Budget

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is seeking \$1 billion in assistance to Ukraine for the Department of State and Defense Department to counter Russia, documents revealed on Monday.

"In addition, the Budget provides nearly \$1 billion in assistance to Ukraine for the State Department, USAID and Department of Defense to counter Russian malign influence and to meet emerging needs related to security, energy, cyber security issues, disinformation, macroeconomic stabilization and civil society resilience," the budget proposal said.

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Biden Asks \$6.9Bln for European Deterrence Initiative, NATO and Countering Russia - Budget

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's budget proposal for 2023 requests \$6.9 billion for the European deterrence initiative, NATO, and countering Russia's influence in the region, documents revealed on Monday.

"The Budget includes \$6.9 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and countering Russian aggression to support Ukraine, the United States' strong partnerships with NATO allies, and other European partner states by bolstering funding to enhance the capabilities and readiness of U.S. Forces, NATO allies, and regional partners in the face of Russian aggression," the budget proposal said.

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Guterres Says UN Humanitarian Chief Will Hopefully Visit Moscow, Kiev for Ceasefire Talks

UNITED NATIONS, March 28 (Sputnik) - UN Humanitarian Coordinator Martin Griffiths will hopefully travel to Moscow and Kiev soon to engage in talks on the possibility of a humanitarian ceasefire in Ukraine, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Monday.

"I hope that [Griffiths] will be able to go to both Moscow and Kiev as soon as that becomes possible. It's very important to establish a serious dialogue with both parties in relation to the possibility of this humanitarian ceasefire," Guterres said.

Earlier on Monday, Guterres announced that Griffiths will explore with Russia and Ukraine a potential humanitarian ceasefire agreement in order to make progress toward a politically negotiated peace.

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Biden Proposes New 20% Minimum Tax on Billionaires - Budget Request

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is proposing a new 20% minimum tax on billionaires, according to the 2023 budget request released by the White House on Monday.

"To finally address this glaring problem, the Budget includes a 20 percent minimum tax on multi-millionaires and billionaires who so often pay indefensibly low tax rates. This minimum tax would apply only to the wealthiest 0.01 percent of households—those with more than \$100 million—and over half the revenue would come from billionaires alone," the statement said.

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IAEA to Present Initiatives About Security of Ukraine's Nuclear Sites in Coming Days - UN

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will roll out a number of important initiatives in the next couple of days to secure Ukraine's nuclear facilities, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Monday.

"I was this morning in contact with the Director General of International Atomic Energy Agency," Guterres said. "There will be a number of very important initiatives by the IAEA in the next few days in order to guarantee the security of the nuclear facilities inside Ukraine."

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Unmanned Robot Surface Ships Double US Maritime Surveillance in Middle East - Admiral

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - A new, rapidly expanding fleet of unmanned surface vessels (USVs) operated by the US Navy and allies is tripling the surveillance range of forces in the Middle East region, Central Command (CENTCOM) Naval (NAVCENT) Commander Vice Adm. Brad Cooper said on Monday.

"That process has allowed us to expand our maritime awareness two to three times from 20 miles out from shore to 40 to 60 miles out from shore. It is a dramatic increase in scale," Cooper told a Middle East Institute podcast.

Cooper said the US Navy's goal is to have 100 of the USVs patrolling in the waters of the Middle East by the summer of 2023.

US partner nations in regional security would also be operating the new drone surface vessels and two centers to operate them had already been established in Bahrain and Jordan, he said.

"It would mostly be an investment by partners. Everyone is eager to have this capability.

...Bahrain is leading the way with us in this unmanned initiative [and] one of the partners is Israel," Cooper said.

The ability to operate a full force of USVs on the surface of the seas was a fresh one as the technology required to effectively and reliably operate it had only matured in the past two years. But already, one such ship had stayed out for 45 days with no crew and no maintenance required, Cooper added.

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Biden Administration Projects Deficit of \$1.4Trln or 5.8% of GDP for 2022 - Budget Request

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - The administration of Joe Biden projects deficit of \$1.4 trillion or 5.8% of GDP, for 2022, according to the budget request released by the White House on Monday.

"The Budget projects a deficit of \$1.4 trillion, or 5.8 percent, of GDP for 2022— less than half the deficit the President inherited and more than \$1 trillion less than the deficit for 2021," the statement said.

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Biden Requests \$10.6Bln to Address Global Health Security Challenges - Budget

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's budget proposal for 2023 requests \$10.6 billion to bolster the United States' role in addressing global health security challenges and \$11 billion for international climate finance, documents revealed on Monday.

"The Budget includes \$10.6 billion to bolster US leadership in addressing global health and health security challenges, a \$1.4 billion increase above the 2021 enacted level," the budget proposal said.

The budget also requests over \$11 billion in international climate finance.

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Biden Seeks \$1.8Bln to Support Indo-Pacific Region, \$400Mln to Counter China's Influence

WASHINGTON, March 28 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's 2023 budget proposal seeks nearly \$1.8 billion to support a free and open Indo-Pacific region and \$400 million to counter China's influence, documents revealed on Monday.

"To support American leadership in defending democracy, freedom and security worldwide, the budget includes nearly \$1.8 billion to support a free and open, connected, secure, and resilient Indo-Pacific region and the Indo-Pacific strategy, and \$400 million for the Countering the People's Republic of China Malign Influence Fund," the budget proposal said.